**Accountable Talk**

As educators, we know that learning is social and that peer interactions help extend understanding. The idea that peers can scaffold new learning effectively for one another was one of Lev Vygotsky's great contributions to our field. Yet many teachers are reluctant to turn the class over to collaborative learning, for fear that they will lose control and thus lose valuable instructional time. We don't base this claim on observation alone. A study of the experiences of 1,000 elementary students across the United States found that they spent 91 percent of their days in either whole-group or independent seatwork, with only 4.8 percent engaged with peers in a learning activity (Pianta, Belsky, Houts, & Morrison, 2007). It isn't for lack of teacher knowledge, either, as 90 percent of the teachers held a credential, and 44 percent possessed a master's degree.

Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock's (2001) analysis of effective instructional strategies identifies cooperative learning with peers as one of nine research-based strategies with a large effect size (.78). In particular, small-group interactions with peers offer several benefits for English language learners:

* Repetition of key words and phrases;
* Functional, context-relevant speech;
* Rich feedback; and
* Reduced student anxiety. (Hill & Flynn, 2006, p. 56)

Although we believe a strong research base exists for creating opportunities for students to work together, we also recognize the reluctance many teachers have about using such an approach. Some have concerns about management—a fear of the proverbial cocktail party breaking out and an exhausting attempt to restore order—and some labor under the misconception that real learning can occur only under a teacher's direct instruction. In the following section, we will describe a set of principles for managing academic discourse among peers and specific strategies that foster learning English while learning in English.

The academic language of the speaker is only one side of the equation—the listener also has responsibilities. Beyond basic social expectations regarding polite behavior, true discussion needs the active participation of others if there is to be an exchange of ideas. Lauren Resnick (1995) introduced the concept of accountable talk as a means of raising the level of academic discourse among students. Accountable talk governs the norms of academic discourse and requires that students ask for and furnish evidence to support their statements (Michaels, O'Conner, Hall, & Resnick, 2002). This ensures rigor and moves the conversation from task-oriented to concept-oriented learning.

In a classroom filled with accountable talk, students ask one another about their thinking and build on the responses of others. They cite evidence, ask for elaborations and clarifications, and extend understandings by using the statements they have heard from their classmates to form new ideas. We place a table card on each group's desk at the start of each collaborative learning activity to reinforce the need for holding oneself (and each other) accountable for rigorous discussion (see Figure 5.3).

**Figure 5.3. Accountable Talk Poster**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Remember to …** | **Sounds like …** |
| Ask questions when you don't understand a topic. | Can you tell me more?  Would you say that again?  Can you give me another example so I can understand? |
| Give a reason why your idea is a good one. | This reminds me of \_\_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.  I believe this is true because \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. |
| Ask for evidence when something sounds incorrect. | I'm not sure that's right. Can you tell me why you think it is true?  Can you show me a place in the book that illustrates that idea? |
| Give evidence to support your statements. | Read a passage from the book that illustrates your idea.  Bring another information source to support your idea. |
| Use ideas from others to add to your own. | I agree with \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_\_\_.  \_\_\_\_\_\_'s idea reminds me of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. |

Students take quickly to accountable talk, and many appreciate the guidelines because they prevent conversations from going astray. For example, consider the following conversation in Ms. Hirano's 2nd grade class as four students discuss an ant diagram during science. They have been asked to talk about the ways that insects communicate and to decide what body parts are used by the ant:

**Kristina:** Well, I know they touch.

**Roberto:** But how do you know? You can't just say "you know." [*requesting evidence*]

**Kristina:** 'Cause I seen them wave their—their—what are those pointers on their heads?

**Ting:** Right here [points to diagram]. Antennae. [*offering evidence*]

**Kristina:** Yeah, antennae. They use their antennae to touch each other.

**Alejandra:** We're s'posed to use that word. Ms. Hirano wrote it on the board—*antennae*. They touch their antennae to see each other. [*using ideas from others*]

**Ting:** Do they have eyes on their antennae? Show me? [*requesting evidence*]

**Alejandra:** [examines diagram closely] I don't see eyes. [*giving evidence*]

**Roberto:** The eyes is here [points to label that reads "eyes"].

**Kristina:** Oh, yeah, that's right! They can see! They use their eyes to see. [*using ideas from others*]

**Ting:** Look how teeny they are. They must not see a lot of stuff.

This is a typical accountable talk interaction among young children and is all the more remarkable because it doesn't sound contrived. They still think and speak as 7-year-olds, but the difference is that they are listening to one another instead of speaking in parallel. In addition, the conversation hasn't wandered from the topic, because the students are accustomed to working together like this. Taken together, the language goals and accountable talk guide the academic discourse of the group, without imposing an artificial structure that limits students' thinking.

Of course, these four students didn't end up together through happenstance. Ms. Hirano created a heterogeneous group of students with varied content knowledge, language proficiency, and social styles. In the next section, we will discuss grouping considerations for managing talk in the classroom.

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/108035/chapters/Procedures-for-Classroom-Talk.aspx>

<http://www.pinterest.com/explore/accountable-talk/>

<https://www.coursera.org/course/accountabletalk>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3p3sH6-pL8>